Suggested headline:

***See for yourself what made America great***

With thanks to Willie and Waylon:

*“I grew up dreaming of being a cowboy, loving the cowboy ways.”*

That’s as good a way of explaining my wanderlust for America’s West as I can provide. It helps that my childhood took place during the Golden Age of movie and television westerns in the 1950s and ‘60s, when John Wayne rode tall through Monument Valley and James Arness patrolled Dodge City as Marshall Matt Dillon.

And it certainly didn’t hurt that I grew up on a farm where we ran about a hundred head of beef cattle, along with growing various grain crops. My pony Silver and I spent many hours pretending we were pushing a herd to the railhead.

The final destination again this year was Tucson, Arizona, but the meandering out-and-back trip along two different paths took me through southwest Missouri – where Wild Bill Hickok, a native of Illinois, by the way, killed a man in what is believed to be the first quick-draw gunfight, in Springfield.

I road-warriored through parts of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Kansas, Iowa and, of course, Illinois and Wisconsin. Long stretches took me off the interstate highways, often on two-lane roads through sparsely populated places.

In due course I’ll point out some highlights, but first an observation. All too often travelers fly over most of the country going from big city to big city. They see airports and tall buildings. Nothing against cities, but most of America exists in those in-between places. Folks there love their country, their wide-open spaces lifestyle, but often have some resentment and a sense of feeling left out and laughed at by urban America.

Understand that, first, if you’re trying to get a grip on why the United States seems so disunited today.

That’s as close as I’ll get to politics with today’s piece.

Let’s get on with a few suggestions for folks who might share my love affair with slow-laning the sights and scenes of America. I suggest starting with some history of the country as you travel. For this particular western journey, a few books: (1) Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, a sad story of the conquering of the west through Indian eyes; (2) Throne of Grace, westward expansion from the vantage point of early explorers and Mountain Men; (3) The Last Gunfight, how the OK Corral marked the end of an era; (4) The Heart of Everything That Is, about Red Cloud’s surprisingly victorious war with the U.S. Army; and (5) Dodge City, the Wickedest Town in the West.

Let history be your guide when you set out to see who we are and where we came from.

On to a few quick observations from my 4,000-plus mile route.

* From Roswell, New Mexico – yes, that UFO Roswell – to Las Cruces, New Mexico, the road takes you along White Sands National Park and White Sands Missile Range. Testing missiles requires remoteness, as you might imagine.
* Plenty to see in deep southern Arizona from the Apache homelands, to the old mining town of Bisbee, to Tombstone’s shootout site and saloons, even the monument just north of the Mexican border memorializing the presumed route of Spanish explorer Francisco Coronado in 1540, which began the conquest of the West.
* Old Tucson, for those, like me, who love western movies and television, is not to be missed. It started as a movie set. Now it’s a theme park, though westerns are still filmed there, too. Seriously, think of any western star and most movies, and Old Tucson served as backdrop. John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Walter Brennan, James Arness, Paul Newman, Kevin Costner, Randolph Scott. The movies Rio Bravo, Hombre, McClintock, Joe Kidd, Silverado. After visiting Old Tucson you can’t help but recognize the landmarks.
* In New Mexico, from Alamogordo and Riudoso and across Lincoln County, it’s easy to imagine the legendary Billy the Kid riding through the arroyos and mesas during the cattle wars.
* On to Tucumcari, which in more modern times was a key point along historic Route 66. The town has seen better days, dotted with very old and often now vacant ‘50s and ‘60s style motels. Grab a bite at Del’s Restaurant, still a hot eatery. The food is delicious.
* I wanted to see Dodge City, Kansas, and getting there from Tucumcari takes a ride through seriously remote parts of New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma’s panhandle and into sparsely populated Kansas. The route roughly parallels the old Texas cattle drives. It’s also fairly close to where the two battles of Adobe Walls were fought, northwest of Amarillo. There, Comanche warriors led by Quanah Parker – son of a Comanche chief and the captive Cynthia Parker – tangled with buffalo hunters, including Bat Masterson, who would become famous as a lawman in Dodge City.
* As for cattle, this old farm boy can recognize the scent of manure – lots of manure -- which literally hangs in the air for miles in northern Texas and the Oklahoma panhandle. Cattle processing sites are everywhere, hundreds of thousands of cattle waiting to become steaks on your plate. Let’s just say my taste for red meat is still recovering.
* In Dodge City I spent the night in a hotel on Wyatt Earp Boulevard. It was here that young Earp – like Hickok, a native of Illinois – made a reputation as a lawman. It’s said he and Masterson were the models for Marshall Dillon. The Boot Hill Museum is for history lovers. There’s even a recreation of the frontier town – most of the commercial district burned in the late 1800s – complete with the Long Branch Saloon. Alas, Miss Kitty was nowhere to be found.

If you want to know more, go see it yourself.

Ditch the plane ticket and go explore America’s backroads. Find out what really made America great. It’s still out there.

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News, and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. Write to him at bbarth@beloitdailynews.com.*